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# German, Spanish and Mandarin speakers' metapragmatic awareness of vague language compared

## Abstract

English vague language (VL), as in general noun phrases, general extenders and general verbs, is central to casual conversation. It can have discourse functions and create an informality and solidarity. The rationale for the study described here was a gap in the literature vis-à-vis language learner metapragmatic awareness of VL in their L1. It was hypothesised that attitudes towards VL vary from language to language.

This paper describes a comparative questionnaire study of Mandarin, German and Spanish speakers' attitudes to VL in their languages. Subjects were invited to translate English VL to their languages and to think of other vague forms: German speakers volunteered 'Dingsbums' and 'und so'; Spanish speakers suggested 'cómo se llame' and 'o algo así'; Mandarin speakers noted 'na ge dong xi'.

Subjects were also asked to describe social variables, domains and functions associated with their VL: German speakers saw VL as creating closeness but many felt that it made addressors sound unreliable and mildly impolite; Spanish speakers mostly saw VL as a way of showing a relaxed, close, comfortable, friendly, but a few saw it as a sign of laziness and impoliteness; Mandarin speakers responded that VL was a marker of friendly informality and solidarity but they mostly associated it with indifference, laziness, impatience, irritation, anger, disappointment, contempt and dishonesty.

The paper concludes with suggestions of ways to incorporate tasks on VL into English language teaching classrooms, and to raise language teachers' awareness of English L2 users' beliefs and intercultural differences in terms of VL.

## 1. Introduction

Research on vague language (VL), suffixes, words and phrases that are empty semantically and heavily dependent on the context for their meaning, has come a

long way since Lakoff (1972), Crystal and Davy (1975) and Channell (1994). Studies of VL, defined as language that is 'inherently and intentionally imprecise, describing lexical and grammatical surface features themselves that may refer either to specific entities or to nothing in particular' (Cutting, 2007:4), have focused on general words, general extenders, vague quantifiers and vague modals (see Section 1.1), disputing the popularly held belief that VL is 'sloppy', 'woolly' and 'inadequate' (Jucker et al, 2003; Koester, 2007), and suggesting that it is fundamental to spoken and written English, especially informal conversations. In addition to its textual cohesion and epistemic stance functions, English VL serves to create a relaxed atmosphere, show solidarity, boost interpersonal rapport and mitigate face threats. Research has now extended to VL in other languages and language learning. What is lacking is studies of language learners' and teachers' awareness of and attitudes to VL in their first language (L1), which could inform the teaching of VL in a second language (L2).

This paper responds to this need by exploring the metapragmatic awareness of VL of Spanish and Mandarin speakers, and comparing the results with those of Cutting (2015), who studied German speakers, to discover whether there is a common understanding of VL or whether awareness of form and attitude towards social context varies from language to language. To reach this aim, the study described here used a questionnaire to ask English language teachers and learners, with regards to English VL,

1. whether they could find equivalents in their own language
2. how easy it was to translate it to their own language  
and with regards to their own language,
3. whether they were aware of other forms of VL
4. what variation and social functions they associated with VL

The study was driven by the expectation that language teachers, informed about the possible preconceptions of their learners, will be enabled to help them to understand and use VL in the target language, and that learners who are aware of

how VL is used in other cultures will be equipped to establish interpersonal rapport required in order to achieve their social or professional goals. Zhao and Nie (2015:1257) note that, in business, using VL is an effective negotiation strategy, while Zhang and Shi (2017:585) are persuaded that appropriate use of VL reduces conflict in negotiations. Liu (2015) sees a command of VL in the target language as essential to achieving business goals in cross-cultural written communication.

The paper begins with an analysis of studies of English VL forms, functions and variation, and then reviews the research on English VL used by speakers of other languages and on VL in other languages, so as to explain the background against which the findings of the study were interpreted.

## 1.1 English vague language forms

VL forms are described here to establish the terms of reference. In research literature, the most frequently mentioned English VL features are vague lexical items and vague modifiers. Vague lexical items consist of general nouns and general extenders (GEs). General nouns are generic superordinates, which can be standard general nouns, as in 'thing' and 'stuff', or colloquial general nouns, as in 'thingymajig' and 'what-you-call-it'.

GEs are vague category markers that tend to occur in clause-final position. Adjunctive GEs (Overstreet, 2005) consist of 'and' + general noun phrase, as in 'and things' and 'and that'. They are what Romero-Trillo (2015:55) calls 'endocentric', orienting the addressee to 'previously agreed common ground with the addresser'. Disjunctive GEs are 'or' + general noun phrase, as in 'or anything' and 'or something like that'. These are 'exocentric', orienting the addressee to 'an alternative meaning outside the speaker-hearer cognitive agreed realm' (ibid).

As far as vague modifiers are concerned, these add vagueness to other items and include vague quantifiers and other epistemic stance markers. Numeric vague quantifiers are vague expressions that modify a number, as in '*about* fifty' and '*around* 7pm'. Non-numeric quantifiers modify nouns, as in '*lots of* work' and '*umpte*en

jackets'. The other vague modifiers are hedging devices, adjectival or adverbial expressions that qualify the addressor's commitment to the truth value of a proposition. These include modal adverbs, as in 'probably' and 'definitely', pragmatic force modifiers, as in 'sort of' and 'kind of', and colloquial adjectival particles, as in 'appointment-y' and 'morning-ish'.

## 1.2 English vague language functions and variation

This section points to studies of English VL functions and variation to provide a framework of analysis of the German, Spanish and Mandarin VL highlighted in the study. As Overstreet (2011:308) notes, 'the particular function of a vague expression has to be interpreted locally in context' and generalisations should be treated with caution, yet studies have shown trends vis-à-vis English VL's textual, epistemic and sociopragmatic functions. The textual function is one of lexical cohesion, e.g. 'That's my dog. I love *the thing*', in which 'thing' refers anaphorically to 'the dog', and the epistemic function is one that expresses tentativeness and doubt, signalling that the addressor is not committed to the truth value of their words, e.g. 'He's *sort of* 30-ish'

The sociopragmatic function of English VL is a matter of interpersonal cohesion, politeness strategies and face-saving. This tends to be seen as the main function (Overstreet, 2011). VL can create and be created by a friendly, convergent, informal, relaxed atmosphere. It is employed in expressions that show solidarity towards a hearer, signalling closeness and high-involvement (Cheng, 2007). VL can have the function of avoiding imposition on the addressor, avoiding appearing too authoritative, direct, offensive, derogatory and pretentious (Channell 1994), and displaying humility (Ruzaité 2007). It can maintain a respectful distance between addressor and addressee, functioning to soften complaints and criticisms (Jucker et al, 2003). To date, studies have focused on the positive aspects of VL usage. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that it can also be used to protect privacy and exclude, and may be involved in impoliteness and power.

Moving on to variation, the most rapidly developing area of English VL research in recent years has been in settings: academic (Rowland, 2007; Ruzaité, 2007), medical (Adolphs et al, 2007; Tseng and Zhang, 2018), legal (Cotterill, 2007; Li, 2017) and offices (Koester, 2007). Other variables explored are gender, social class, (Cheshire, 2007; Levey, 2012), age (Lin, 2013; Palacios Martínez, 2011), and depth of relationship (Cutting, 2000). Most research has tended to focus on isolated variables, whereas in reality variables overlap.

### 1.3 English vague language used by speakers of other languages

Of relevance to the current study is research on English as a Lingua Franca users (ELF), since the participants were English language teachers and students.

Comparisons of form have involved vague lexical items. Most studies were about GEs. Cucchi (2010) revealed that NNSEs used 'etc' more and 'and so on' less than native speakers of English (NSEs). Fernandez and Yuldashev (2011), Lin (2013), Metsä-Ketelä (2012) and Xu (2016) discovered that NNSEs utilised fewer GEs than NSEs did. De Cock (2004) noted that French NNSE university students used more formal written style GEs ('and so on', 'etcetera') than NSEs. Parvaresh et al (2012) found that Persian NNSEs used VL items that NSEs did not use ('and and and', 'and this and that'). Buysse (2014) studied Dutch learners of English to find that they used adjunctive GEs less frequently than NSEs did.

German NNSEs have been shown to use English GEs inappropriately. Terraschke and Holmes (2007:212-13) found that they used vague quantifier 'or so' as a GE: 'I don't know how how much the New Zealand wine is maybe it's like the Australian's just the cheapest *or so*.' Terraschke (2007) attributed this phenomenon to a transfer of *oder so*, a common disjunctive in German, just as she attributed the absence of 'and things' to the lack of word-for-word equivalent in German.

### 1.4 Vague language in other languages

This section outlines studies of VL in languages other than English in order to illustrate similarities across cultures. It highlights research in German, Spanish and Mandarin to provide a point of comparison for the findings of this project.

Some studies have examined equivalents to English VL. Examining French, Mihatsch (2010) found that *espèce de* functions like 'sort of', and that *ou quelque chose comme ça* is in line with 'or something like that'. Kleiber and Gerhard-Krait (2006) discovered that French *quelque part* functions as an adverbial hedge, similar to 'in a way'. Secova's French study (2017) demonstrated that *et tout*, as in *Je sais et tout, mais...* ('I know and all but ...'), is dominant across all social divides, unlike English 'and stuff' and 'and that' which vary according to social class (Cheshire, 2007; Levey, 2012). Comparing GEs in English and in Russian business talk, Malyuga and McCarthy (2018) found a series of equivalents, e.g., *в таком (этом) духе* similar to 'or something (like that)' and *и все такое (прочее)* translating as '(and) stuff (like that)'.

Other studies have devoted themselves to observations about function. Lauwereyns (2002) analysed the Japanese GE *toka* ('or something') finding that after a self-quotation it was aimed at establishing rapport, and Barotto (2018) called *toka* an exemplifying marker of vagueness.

German VL research has focused on GEs and their functions. As with other languages, GEs have an epistemic function of hedging and indicating politeness. *Oder so* ('or something') and *und so* ('and things'), the most frequent in conversations (Terraschke, 2007), function mostly as hedges and list completers (Schwitalla, 1997). Overstreet (2005) found that disjunctives *oder so*, *oder sowas* ('or something like that') occurred more frequently than adjunctives *und so weiter* ('and so on') or *und was weiß ich* ('and whatnot'). She noted that all GEs indicated solidarity, and could function as intensifiers to emphasise a statement or encourage an answer. Terraschke and Holmes (2007) found that GEs did indeed show solidarity, as in *mit Hausaufgaben teilweise und so'n Mist* ('with homework and shit like that'), but pointed out that they also typically show uncertainty, as in *Stickmen oder so ähnlich* ('Stickmen or

something like that'), and soften negative attitudes, as in *sehr veraltet waren in ihren Einstellungen und so* ('very conservative in their attitudes *and stuff*').

Spanish VL research has tended to focus on hedges rather than GEs. Fernández (2013) analysed the functions of *tipo* used by young Argentine people, finding it behaving like a vague quantifier, as in *Podés el miércoles tipo 5 dale?* ('Can you on Wednesday *around* 5 OK?'), and like a hedging device, as in *¿Y no me acuerdo algo de tipo campeonatos o puede ser algo así?* ('I don't remember something about *sort of* championships or is it something like that?') (ibid:94). Vague modifiers have also been found to be of interest by Travis (2005) working with *pues* ('so') and *bueno* ('well'), and Jørgensen and Stenström (2009) focusing on *como* ('like').

Mandarin VL research has explored many forms and functions. Several studies have analysed VL as a whole. Ning et al (2012) found VL in advertisements used to deceive consumers. Zhao (2010) investigated the use of VL as a communicative strategy in Chinese business negotiations, focusing on general nouns, as in *shawanyir* ('whatisit') and *yibanren* ('all the *people*'), vague quantifiers such as *dayue* ('about') and *dianr* ('a little'), and vague modal adverbs, e.g. *ne* ('well') and *keneng* ('possibly'). Some scholars have investigated particular VL items. Zhao considered the usage of general nouns to be a cause of misunderstandings and breakdowns in negotiations, and found them used for turn-holding whilst formulating thoughts, as in *'Lingwai, lingwai ni zhe hai you ge shenme dongxi, ni hai, hai you ge'* ('In addition, well, you still have, *whatisit*, you still have') (2010: 271-272). Jiang (2012) analysed the vague quantifier 'verb + *yixia*' ('for a short while') in Chinese TV serials, finding that it has a mitigating function in directives, as in *'deng wo yixia!*' ('Wait for me *for a moment!*'), in assertives, as in *wo zhishi xiang liaojie yixia nimen de shengchan xianlu yu Deguo tonglei chanpin shifou yizhi* ('I *just* want to know whether your production line is the same with that of the German's') and in offers, as in *wo keyi bang nimen zhidian yixiaer* ('I may be able to help you guys out *a little bit*'). Ran (2010) analysed the



hedging device *ba* and found it used to mitigate the face threat of an utterance, as in *Na bu shi zhe yang ba* ('Maybe it is not so').

What is lacking is an exploration the users' awareness of and attitude towards the VL that they use. That is what this paper explores.

## 2 Method of Data Collection and Analysis

Since the aim was to compare Spanish and Mandarin speakers' beliefs with those of the German speakers in Cutting's (2015) study, driven by the same four research questions, the same questionnaire was used. This meant focusing on vague lexical items rather than vague modifiers. The questionnaire was anonymous; respondents were told that they could withdraw at any time and consented to their responses being used in publications.

To ensure valid comparison, similar types of sample were surveyed. In Cutting (2015), 178 German lecturers and university students of English took part. In the Spanish part of the project, which took place in Madrid, there were 119 participants: 18 lecturers, 84 students and 17 others (e.g. administrators, engineers, unemployed). In the Mandarin part, which ran in Beijing, Xi'an, Shenzhen, Shanghai and Zhejiang, there were 258 participants: English lecturers and English major students. The ratio of lecturers to students in the German and Mandarin parts was similar to that of the Spanish, given that the questionnaire was administered after a student lecture with lecturers present. Both teachers and English major/Masters students participated in the study but the responses were not analysed separately for these groups, since they were all high-level English as a Lingua Franca speakers, the teachers themselves essentially being learners. The 'others' in the Spanish part could have potentially skewed the Spanish data, but they constituted only 14% of the group and the qualitative analysis of the data suggested that the 'others' answers did not differ greatly.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts (see Appendix). Part One asked respondents to read ten excerpts of spontaneous interactions in English and write equivalents in their own language of the general nouns and GEs in the excerpts<sup>1</sup>. Part Two contained three open questions. The first asked how easy it was to translate it to their own language, the second what other features of vagueness there are in their language, and the third what social contexts, functions and impression they associated with VL in their language. Some of the Spanish respondents chose to reply in Spanish. All Chinese respondents were encouraged to write in pinyin script rather than Mandarin characters, for ease of analysis. Since they were Mainland Chinese, not Taiwanese, this did not appear to be a problem.

The data was collated and counted using an Excel spreadsheet by research assistants, one a native speaker of Spanish, the other of Mandarin. They occasionally spontaneously added their own explanation or commentary for individual answers, e.g. '*dong dong* = *dong xi* (thing), is used as kind of "baby language" which is popular among young adults'. To enable comparisons between the three groups, the researcher calculated the percentage of each linguistic item for each group in answers to Part One questions, and carried out thematic analysis to analyse Part Two answers. Findings were triangulated informally by presenting them in conferences, as well as inviting Spanish and Chinese linguists to provide feedback on the first draft of this article. This was especially useful given the qualitative nature of the answers to Part Two questions.

### 3 Results and Discussion

This section describes general trends in order to facilitate comparison.

#### 3.1 Equivalents

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<sup>1</sup> The questionnaire included questions about general verb 'do' but since all respondents suggested one or two verbs and made no comment, general verbs will not be dealt with in this paper.

	English	German	Spanish	Mandarin
<b>General nouns</b>				
- Standard	'that thing'	<i>das Ding</i> (23%)	<i>eso/esto</i> (36%)	<i>na ge dong xi</i> (26%)
	'these things'	<i>diesen Dingen</i> (16%)	<i>esas/estas cosas</i> (38%)	<i>zhe xie dong xi</i> (26%)
	'the same things'	<i>das gleiche</i> (16%)	<i>lo mismo</i> (32%)	[no word suggested by 5%]
	'a few people'	<i>Leute</i> (77%)	<i>algunas personas</i> (19%)	<i>(yi xie) ren</i> (55%)
	'all the people'	<i>alle</i> (30%)	<i>todos</i> (30%)	<i>ren</i> (33%)
- Colloquial	'what-you-call-it'	<i>Dingsda</i> (9%)	<i>como se llame(n)</i> (45%)	<i>dong xi</i> (12%)
	'thingmajig'	<i>Dingsbums</i> (56%)	<i>la cosa esa/esta</i> (12%)	[no word suggested by 5%]
<b>General Extenders</b>				
	'all that kind of thing'	<i>und so</i> (10%)	<i>y todo eso</i> (29%)	[no word suggested by 5%]
	'or something'	<i>oder so</i> (40%)	<i>o algo</i> (45%)	<i>hai shi shen me</i> (15%)
	'and things'	<i>und so</i> (39%)	<i>y eso</i> (27%)	<i>deng deng</i> (20%)

**Table 1: Equivalents**

Table 1 shows the equivalents suggested, listing only the top answer per category for each language, when at least 5% of respondents offered it as a translation, to enable a clear comparison.

As Cutting's (2015) study of German VL showed, as far as general nouns are concerned, 23% of respondents answered that standard general nouns 'thing' translated as *das Ding*, and 77% translated 'people' as *Leute*. Over half of the

suggested translations of colloquial general noun 'thingmajig' were *Dingsbums*. A few saw no difference between the standard and the colloquial, translating both as *Ding*. Many elided the nouns when translating general nouns modified by adjectives, e.g. *das gleiche* ('the same') and *alle* ('all'). 40% of respondents translated GEs appropriately, offering *und so (was)* for 'and things', and *oder so (was)* 'or something'. On the other hand, another 40% mentioned *oder so* as an equivalent of 'or so', resonating with Terraschke and Holmes' (2007) findings. Respondents translated 'and all those kind of things' as *und so*, unperturbed by the lack of word-for-word equivalent, thus contradicting Terraschke's (2007) finding.

Over a third of the Spanish respondents translated the standard general nouns word-for-word, suggesting *estas cosas* for 'these things'. When asked to translate colloquial general noun forms, 45% proposed *como se llame(n)* ('what's it') More than a third preferred substitution, offering pronouns *eso/esto* ('that'/'this'), and elision, dropping the nouns when modified by an adjective, e.g. *lo mismo* ('the same') and *todos* ('all'). Disjunctive GE 'or something' translated word-for-word (*o algo*) for nearly half of the respondents. A third offered a non-literal translation of GEs, substituting the nouns with pronouns, as in *y todo eso* ('and all that') and *y eso* ('and that'), eliding the noun.

Mandarin respondents offered a wide range of possible translations, e.g. for 'these things' there were 69 variants and for 'and all those kind of things' there were 166. There was often no answer that was offered by 5% and over of the respondents. Many respondents offered *dong xi* for both standard and colloquial general nouns, this interchangeability reflected in Zhao's (2010) study. 6% of respondents wrote that translation of general nouns was not possible, with comments such as 'no vague equivalent in Chinese'.

### 3.2 Ease of Translation

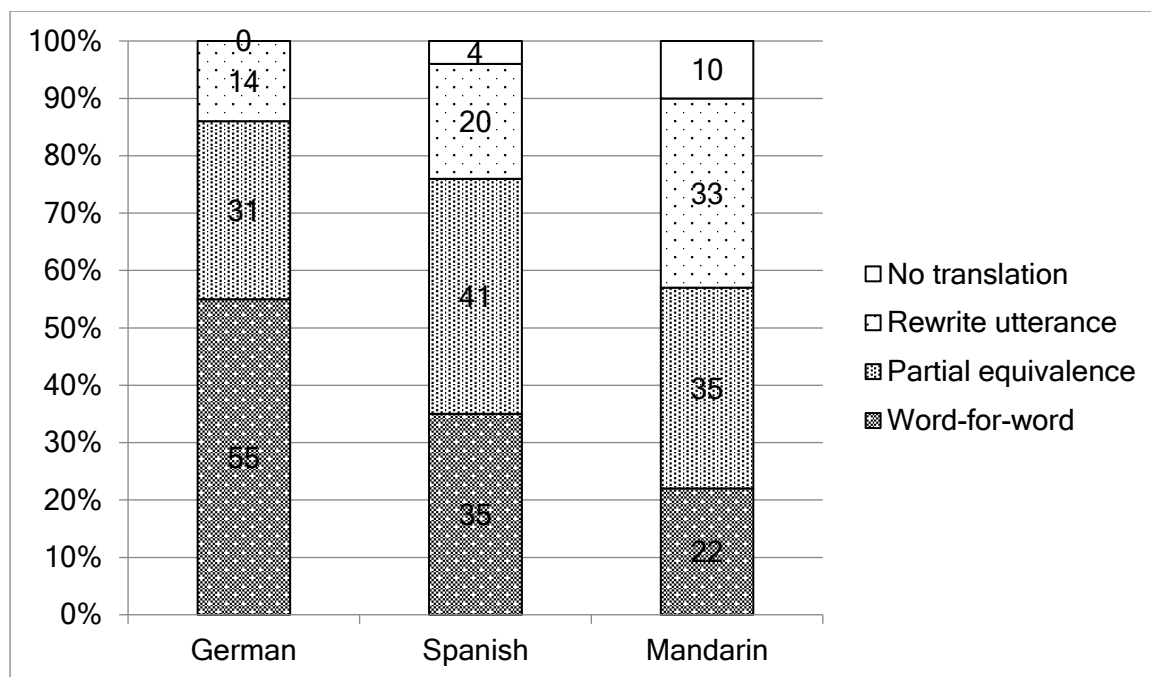


Figure 1: Ease of Translation

Over half of the German respondents in Cutting (2015) felt that they could translate word-for-word (see Figure 1). They said they had no difficulty finding equivalents for general nouns but their comments about GEs frequently exposed confusion between the adjunctive and the disjunctive, as can be seen in the answer 'and things'/'or something': *oder/oder so, ne?*, and the negative transfer of *oder so* detected in Part One. A third of the respondents supported 'partial word-for-word translation', feeling that the possibility of a literal translation depended on the word. One said 'It is very seldom that German sentences end with *und Dinge* (= 'and things')', resonating with Terraschke's (2007) observation. A minority preferred re-writing the whole sentence.

A third of the Spanish respondents opined that English VL translated word-for-word, claiming that they had similar *palabras comodín* (all-purpose words) and *muletillas* (fillers). A larger proportion (41%) argued for partial equivalence, showing an awareness of the substitution and ellipsis offered in Part One, one commenting 'we normally skip the word thing (*cosa*) and only use the demonstratives'. Only 20%

preferred to re-write the utterance, noting that the whole sentence has to be re-written to capture the same meaning.

Only 22% of the Mandarin respondents felt that they could translate word-for-word. A third supported partial equivalence, explaining that it depends on the words to be translated, one respondent making the point 'For general nouns, sometimes we simply omit them'. Again this reflects the Part One findings. In contrast to German and Spanish respondents, a third responded that the whole sentence needed to be re-written to reflect the same meaning and tone, and 10% thought that translation was not possible, suggesting that VL is unimportant in Mandarin: witness 'vague language is quite marginal in terms of its weight in the understanding of whole sentence' and 'We don't say too much useless words'.

### 3.3 Other vague items

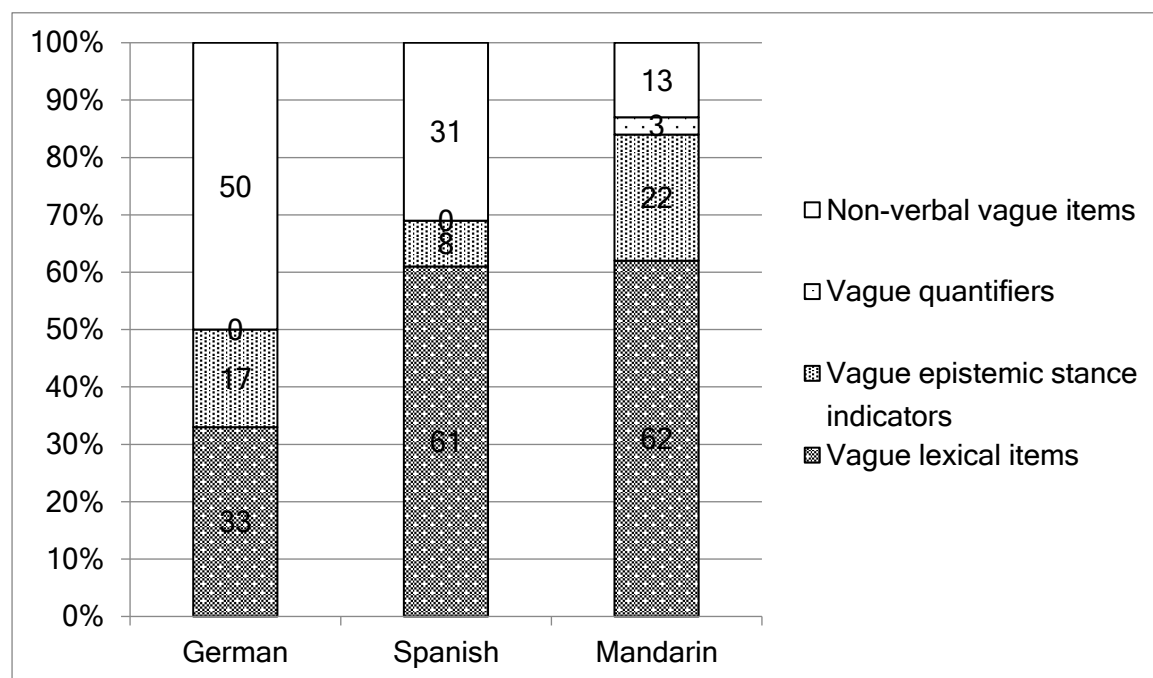


Figure 2: Other vague items

#### 3.3.1 Other vague items in German

A third of the respondents in Cutting (2015) cited vague lexical items (see Figure 2). The most frequent item was elided verbal formulae to avoid answering

health enquiries, e.g. 'I sometimes say *geht so* [OK] when I don't want to tell that I'm not feeling great' and '*Passt schon* ('OK') means that I feel ok and that I don't want to talk further about that theme.' Another was the non-committal 'yes-no' response to a question: *jein*, combining *ja* ('yes') and *nein* ('no'), used, as one said, 'if you are not sure whether to say yes or no', and *tja*, *jaaah* and *joah* which sound like a hesitant 'yes', uttered 'when you don't know the answer or you are not sure'.

17% mentioned vague epistemic stance indicators, with an explicit statement about a lack of knowledge, to avoid answering questions, e.g. *keine Ahnung* ('no idea') and *was weiß ich* ('what do I know'). Respondents also noted modal adverbials, e.g. *vielleicht* ('maybe') and *kann sein* ('could be').

Half of them pointed to vague non-verbal indicators. These were vague sounds, different from non-committal 'yes-no' because there were no recognisable words, as in *hmm*, explained as 'well' and 'thinking', *mmmh*, ('If I don't know the answer straight away, this gives me time to think about') and *ähm* ('German people say *ähm* ... when they're missing a word'). There was a variety of vague fillers, e.g. *ach*, *häh*, *muuh* and *uff*, and some body language, as in 'I say *pff* and shrugging when I don't want to explain why'.

### 3.3.2 Other vague items in Spanish

Two-thirds of respondents offered vague lexical items. Respondents listed vague adjectival and verbal formulae to avoid answering health enquiries, e.g. *ni fú ni fá* ('neither good nor bad') and *allí vamos* ('getting there'). They pointed to vague fillers, as in *pues nada* ('well anyway'), *pues eso* ('so there you go') and *Cuando no quieres expresar nada en especial, usas expresiones tipo 'vivo que no es poco'* ('When you don't want to say anything in particular, you use expressions like I'm alive, which can't be bad').

There were very few vague epistemic stance indicators (8%). They listed adverbials, e.g. *a lo mejor* ('perhaps') and *quizás* ('maybe'). This low awareness of

vague modifiers is curious, given the emphasis of the research literature on them (Fernández, 2013; Jørgensen and Stenström, 2009; Travis, 2005).

A third of Spanish respondents mentioned non-verbal vague indicators, e.g. *buah*, *puff*, *meeh* and *aja*, explaining that they answer evasively and express indifference. They offered comments e.g. *Cuando te preguntan sobre algo que no tienes muy claro se puede contestar 'bah' . También indica que no te interesa el tema* ('When you're asked about something you're not very sure of, you can answer *bah*. It also indicates you're not interested in the topic'). There were also examples of body language, e.g. 'I usually shrug my shoulders'.

### 3.3.3 Other vague items in Mandarin

62% of respondents thought of vague lexical features. The most frequent were vague adjectives as in *hai xing* ('not bad') and *hao hao* ('OK OK') that appeared to be responses to health enquiries, and vague adverbial phrases e.g. *sui bian* ('whatever') and *na li* ('what, me?'), used to avoid a preferred response. Some were vague verbal formulae that constituted a delaying mechanism to avoid responding by indicating that the speaker did not want to give an opinion or explain: *zai xiang xiang* ('need to think about it') and *zai shuo ba* ('let's talk about this next time').

Vague epistemic stance indicators were listed by 22% of respondents. Most frequent were the modal adverbials e.g. *da gai* and *huo xu* ('maybe'), and explicit statements of a lack of commitment to the truth value, e.g. *wo bu tai qing chu* ('not very clear about it') and *bu yi ding* ('it's not certain'). They seemed unaware of vague quantifiers, which were a focus of research.

Non-verbal indicators were fewer (13%), amounting to vague sounds with conventional meanings e.g. *en* ('that's ok'), used 'when people don't have too much to say' and 'when they need to think', and *ha ha* (laughing sound) meaning 'Yes OK'.

## 3.4 Variation and Functions



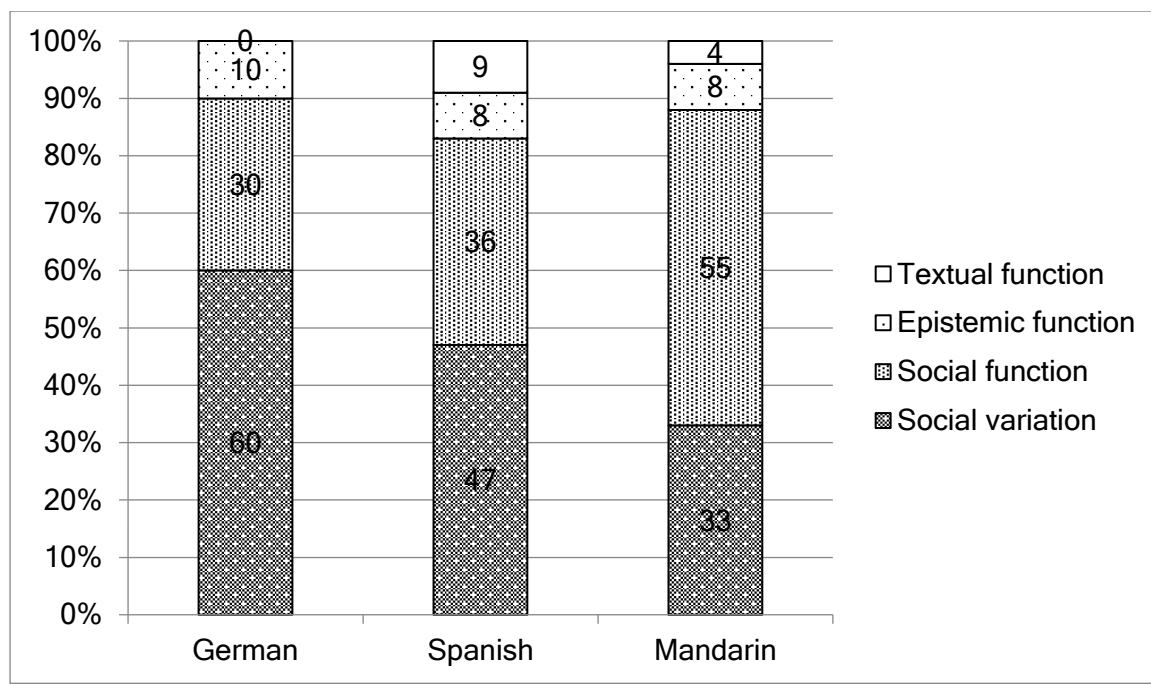


Figure 3: Variation and Functions

	German	Spanish	Mandarin
Variation			
- Relationship	35%	29%	26%
- Age	6%	6%	3%
- Education	5%	5%	2%
- Status	8%	-	2%
- Geography	-	7%	-
- Setting	6%	-	-
Function			
- Informality	17%	30%	18%
- Avoidance	3%	-	15%
- Privacy	-	-	12%
- Indifference	10%	6%	10%

Table 2: Variation and Function Sub-categories

### 3.4.1 Variation and Functions in German

As Figure 3 shows, in Cutting (2015), double the number of German respondents wrote about variation (60%) as did functions (30%). 35% of respondents pointed to

the variable of relationship, noting that it was 'natural' to use VL with family and friends (see Table 2). They perceived that it indicates 'shared meaning, affection and trust', and creates 'closeness', 'intimacy' and a 'feeling of belonging'. Respondents explained that good friends understand each other 'without a correct sentence' and that they can 'even say only one word' and friends know what they mean. Extract (1) mentions non-verbal indicators, reflecting the fact that half of the respondents pointed to vague non-verbal indicators when listing other VL features of German.

- (1) Sometimes good friends understand each other without a correct sentence. A friend says one word and I know what he or she means. I know what she means when I look into her eyes/face, the smile says me what she means.

Status was mentioned as a variable by 8% of respondents. They remarked that it is inappropriate for a person of lower status to talk to a person of higher status using VL, for fear of seeming over self-confident and presuming to be on the level of their superior. Respondents gave examples: 'you can't talk with a teacher and say *hmm* or *pff*', 'With friends you would talk more colloquial (*oder was* = 'or what') and with professors you would rather say *oder etwas ähnliches* ('or something similar').

The dimension of setting (6% of respondents) was related to that of status: respondents wrote about encounters with people of higher status in their work and study contexts. Some said that as a student they would not use VL in class in case they sounded 'incompetent'.

5% of respondents flagged up the educational level variable, associating it with setting and social class. One stressed that VL was not acceptable at university (middle class setting) but that it was appropriate in factories (working class setting). Their comments seemed to express a degree of social prejudice, reflecting negative perceptions. One suggested that anyone who 'needs the word *Ding* very often can not be good in his language', and another declared that VL indicates that 'one is uneducated or has a low amount of vocabulary'.

6% of the respondents expressed views about variation according to age. They said that young people use their own form of VL, one noting that 'in some social contexts, teenagers use VL to be 'cool'. One respondent felt that VL can cause comprehension problems when used across generations. Some comments were somewhat judgemental: one respondent, linking VL to the slang of juveniles, commented that it gives the impression that a person is not reliable.

Moving on to social function, 17% of comments contained a reference to the informality that VL creates, in the sense that it makes for a 'casual', 'at-ease', 'chilled' atmosphere, relating this social function to the variational dimension of depth of relationship. Extract (2) points to a deeper relationship or a community of practice.

- (2) These words are used in a relaxed social context and indicate that you have a close connection or at least a lot in common with the people you talk to

10% of respondents showed negative associations with VL that the researcher called 'indifference'. Some felt that speakers use VL when they are 'too hurried' to give a full answer to a question. One noted that when talking to strangers or people of higher status, VL could create a sense that one is 'bored', 'much too lazy to answer a question', 'sloppy or far too casual'. Respondents explained that VL can also be used when one is 'annoyed' and 'angry' and does not have the patience to find more precise words, as in Extract (3).

- (3) If you want to have distance to people you don't like, if you're not that interested in something (a thing) and you're a bit stressed and don't want to explain yourself that much.

The variable of relationship is relevant here: they saw VL with family and friends as a creating a relaxed atmosphere, but with strangers it gave a bad impression.

10% of comments pointed to an epistemic function of VL, commenting that it alerts addressees that the truth value is not to be trusted. Extract (4) points to the importance of shared knowledge, when individual knowledge fails.

- (4) If you don't remember a word, if you don't find an appropriate word, you expect that your partner of the conversation knows what you mean

### 3.4.2 Variations and Functions in Spanish

Nearly half of the Spanish respondents raised points about social variation. The variable discussed the most was depth of relationship. 29% of respondents commented that VL is reserved for family and friends. Extract (5) illustrates this.

- (5) *Se usa en conversación entre amigos/familia cuando no hace falta decir la propia palabra, lo que parece significar mucha afinidad.* [It's used in conversation between friends/family when you don't have to say the exact word, which seems to indicate great affinity.]

Age, level of education and geographical region were other variables touched upon. As with the German group, 6% pointed to the relationship between VL and age and 5% the relationship between VL and level of education. Those pointing to age and level of education as a variable had similar views in mind: respondents believed that VL was the language of young and less educated people, one comment being:

- (6) *Si usas palabras muy coloquiales se puede decir que eres más 'de barrio' y se piensa que esa persona es más inculta.* [If you use very colloquial words, it can be said you're rather 'local' and people think that that person's somewhat uneducated.]

The Spanish respondents were the only ones who noted regional varieties of VL, e.g. one noted that in Guadalajara the expression *y todo el copón* ('and all that stuff') is used, adding that regional VL has a negative effect on the language as a whole. The Spanish lecturer who triangulated the findings said, 'there's huge geographical variation in VL markers in Spanish, depending on where one's talking about', which tallies with Fernández's (2013) observations about Argentinians and their frequent usage of *tipo*.

A third of respondents mentioned social functions. The overriding one was informality: they emphasised the comfortable, friendly ambiance that VL affords. Extract (7) contains a typical comment.

(7) *Indican cercanía con los que te rodeen, confianza. También que es un ambiente distendido y relajado.* [They indicate closeness with everyone around you, trust. Also that it's a laid-back and relaxed atmosphere.]

A few comments could be categorised as showing indifference, suggesting that these respondents had a negative attitude to some uses of VL. 6% understood it as showing that one has little interest in finishing the sentence, demonstrating *pasotismo* (a couldn't-care-less attitude) and *dejadez* (slovenliness).

Only 8% of respondents mentioned the epistemic function of VL, indicating that 'you do not know how to say a word or you do not remember it', tallying with the low percentage of comments about vague modifiers in the previous question. Only 9% pointed to the textual function, suggesting that VL enables speakers 'to save efforts' and time, 'not thinking too much or repeating words that are mentioned previously'.

### 3.4.3 Variations and Functions in Mandarin

Social variation accounted for a third of the respondents' answers. Depth of relationship was once again by far the most important variable, and again, respondents noted that VL was reserved for family and friends. Extract (8) points to a particularly close relationship.

- (8) Sometimes Chinese people use vague language to show intimacy, e.g. *Na ge dai le ma?* 'Bring *the thing?*' (between husband and wife).

Conversely, many respondents pointed out that VL was not usual in interactions with strangers, and that when it was used, it could create distance. Status (2%), age (3%) and educational level (2%) seemed of less importance to most respondents.

Over half of them made observations about social function. The most important one was marking informality. 18% of respondents claimed that VL makes their language sound 'casual' and 'comfortable' with close friends, as Extract (9) shows.

- (9) If they are intimates, V-words may mean they know each other very much.  
We Chinese call it *mo qi* [tacit understanding; secret agreement]

In contrast to the other two languages, 15% of Mandarin respondents emphasised VL's usage as a marker of avoidance. It allowed them to avoid 'answering a sensitive question' and 'giving an explanation', enabling them to avoid conflict, 'embarrassing' or 'humiliating' the interlocutor or themselves. This, on occasions, amounted to telling white lies to ease social relations, as Extract (10) illustrates.

- (10) Sometimes we use VL to imply refusal. For example my friend invited me to her house, but I don't want to go. I would say *xia ci ba* (next time) or *guo ji tian ba* (after a few days).

This is in line with the delaying mechanism *zai xiang xiang* ('need to think about it'), mentioned in the discussion of other VL items. It echoes Zhang and Shi's (2017) finding that in business negotiations VL serves to mitigate face threat

Again unlike the other two languages, the social function of protecting privacy was noted by 12%. Respondents declared that VL is used to exclude outsiders from private conversations, when speakers 'don't want anyone else get into the conversation' and 'don't want let others know more'. Extract (8) is a relevant example, the *Na ge dai le ma?* ('Bring *the thing?*') being private words between wife and husband.

10% of respondents associated VL with 'indifference', a topic that arose in relation to VL and status, and again a reflection of negative associations with VL. Many respondents emphasised that with strangers or those who are socially distant, it is 'unfriendly', a way of saying that they 'don't like the other person'. Whereas the function of avoidance was a matter of negative politeness, that of expressing indifference could be interpreted as impoliteness. Included within this category were comments that associated VL with 'laziness' and 'impatience', as well as 'irritation' and 'contempt'. Extract 11 explains how VL can be interpreted as duplicitous, tallying with the research literature which found that Mandarin VL can be used to deceive (Ning et al, 2012).

- (11) VL usually creates an impression of being dishonest, not seriously, not confident, but very social and not to be frank

The epistemic and textual functions were apparently less worthy of mention. Only 8% remarked on the epistemic function, noting that VL can be used to 'replace words speaker forget', to fill silence when speakers 'lose track of where the conversation is going'.

### 3.5 Limitations

The questionnaire consisted of open questions, and it could be said that only those answers that came immediately to mind could be retrieved by respondents. However, this is the drawback of most open-question questionnaires, and there is no knowing if a 'take home' questionnaire allowing a longer time for completion would have generated more data. The open-question nature also means that tendencies were mentioned in some groups but not by others even though similar structures are also possible in those languages. The results are simply a reflection of what was most important to the respondents.

Questions 11, 12 and 13 of the questionnaire provided respondents with more than one question and examples. These were aimed at triggering thoughts and memories, and stimulating the imagination and creativity of the respondents. This additional information could have biased the results. However, in answer to question 13, respondents could have stated, that in their culture, VL features were *not* indicators of 'a close relationship' or 'informal and relaxed social contexts', but they did not. Also, different language groups attached different degrees of importance to this function. Significantly, too, the questionnaire did not ask about negative associations, and yet a minority, unprompted, noted that VL can sound unfriendly, too friendly or simply sloppy.

The use of Chi-Square test could have been used to investigate whether the variations between languages are statistically significant. However, the fact that all questions were open and the last three sought qualitative data made this unfeasible, as did the high number of small categories of answers.

## 4 Conclusion

### 4.1 German, Spanish and Mandarin speakers' metapragmatic awareness of VL compared



It would appear that there was a common understanding of VL but that awareness about forms and perceptions about function varied from language to language.

Most respondents were aware of equivalents of English vague lexical items. They tended to translate the general nouns and GEs successfully, and also used ellipsis and substitution. Most German respondents were happy to translate word-for-word and most Spanish to use partial translation, whereas Mandarin-speaking respondents tended to feel that it was better to re-write the utterance, some of them considering that there were no equivalents, seeing VL as 'useless'. These differences may be a reflection of the linguistic distance between English and Mandarin, and the fact that English developed from Germanic dialects and shares Latin roots with Spanish. However, the Mandarin speakers' reluctance to translate English VL may also be a product of the way that English has been taught in China, where learners have been unused to encountering informal spoken English. On the other hand, worldwide, language learning materials have traditionally tended to concentrate on contentful lexical items, largely ignoring VL.

All respondents were able find other forms of VL in their language, Mandarin speakers included. Mandarin and Spanish speakers tended to highlight vague adjectival and verbal formulae. German respondents often placed special emphasis on evasive non-verbal vague items. In all three groups, vague modifiers were not foremost in their minds. This could be because content words such as vague lexical items and sounds were easier to retrieve than function words, whilst filling in the questionnaire, or because respondents may simply have attached less importance to vague modifiers.

In all respondent groups, awareness was shown of the social variables. Many opined that VL usage mostly depends on the depth of relationship, Mandarin respondents attributing greatest importance to this and showing an awareness of geographical variation. The German speakers tended to give more attention to status and setting than the other two groups, suggesting a general emphasis given to

societal structures. Across all cultures, age and education variables were also mentioned, some respondents associating VL with unreliable young or uneducated people. These negative beliefs could stem from popular culture and the press propagating stereotypes, but it is felt more likely to be a consequence of a lack of self-awareness. The reason why respondents were unaware of the pervasiveness of VL across the board in society may simply be that they had not thought about this topic previously.

The functions seemed more important than the dimensions of variation for the many Mandarin respondents, whereas for most German and Spanish speakers, the reverse was true. Some Mandarin respondents emphasised that VL enabled speakers to avoid conflict and embarrassment, and to protect their privacy from outsiders, which could be a reflection of the face-saving principles in Chinese cultures. Most respondents emphasised that VL, when used with family and friends, shows 'intimacy', 'affection', 'trust', 'closeness' and 'belonging', signalling a 'relaxed', 'casual', 'at-ease', 'chilled' and 'comfortable' attitude, but when used with strangers and acquaintances, it is symptomatic of 'sloppy', 'slovenly', 'incompetent', 'unfriendly', 'annoyed', 'impatient', 'bored' behaviour. The negative attitude towards strangers who use VL could arise from a lack of shared knowledge of their intentions and typical behaviour, or an association with unwarranted closeness or indeed impoliteness.

## **4.2 Implications and further research**

This paper aims to raise English, German, Spanish and Mandarin language teachers' awareness of their learners' metapragmatic awareness of VL in their L1. Armed with a knowledge of learners awareness, teachers can teach about VL in the L2 by reminding learners that similar forms exist in their L1, and highlighting parallels and differences.

Teachers alerted to the possibility that their learners believe that VL is the language of young uneducated people indicating a 'sloppy', 'unfriendly', 'annoyed' attitude can remove any barriers that appear in class. It is possible that negative

perceptions of VL in a learner's L1 usage may be transferred to any language they learn. This potential transference merits study.

Learners could be encouraged to think about how VL is used in their L1 and to question any negative opinions that they might have, aided by accounts of the way that VL establishes interpersonal rapport. They could be helped to notice VL forms and functions in the L2. If learners understand how a knowledge of VL might empower them to engage in informal social interactions and improve their professional skills, they may show a desire to develop the ability to use it. In which case, they could experiment in problem-solving interactive tasks, role-play and simulations (Parvaresh and Ahmadian, 2016).

This study has limited itself to vague lexical items of German, Spanish and Mandarin out of context. A questionnaire that includes vague modifiers and other VL items mentioned by respondents here, and that points specifically to the social variables and functions revealed by this study and asks respondents to focus on context, would provide a broader picture of beliefs. Interviews with a random selection of questionnaire respondents would enable an exploration of the causes of the beliefs expressed. An investigation of beliefs about VL in other varieties of English, other languages and language learner discourse would widen the understanding of the field within intercultural pragmatics, and inform teachers and learners worldwide.

## **Vague Questionnaire**

### **Part One excerpts**

How do you express in your language the vague informal words in bold underlined in the following examples, which are taken from my database of students' informal casual conversations with friends in Edinburgh University's Applied Linguistics common room? The words in italics in brackets are there just to suggest what the vague words might be about, to help you understand better: don't translate them.

- 1) CM Can't remember the last time I handed in anything late.  
DM (heh heh // heh heh)  
CM // Usually it's three months early.  
DM (heh heh) Right. (8) So I typed that thing up again after you'd gone.  
CM Oh yeah.

*(questionnaire? interview schedule?)*

- 2) CM But- they they're paranoid about their their islands er dissolving into the ocean so they've done all these cement they're called er (1.5) like - They're huge like the size of this room. One is the size of this room. And they've got thousands of these things stuck out there with the islands. So you might get a stretch of about half a mile of nice sandy beaches and then there's this huge what-you-call-it breaking the surf.

*(breakwaters? blocks?)*

- 3) NM Doom gloom. (1) No-one really challenged him. On this you know. Cos I mean since the Romans basically the same things are getting worse and worse.

*(conditions? situations?)*

- 4) BM // (heh heh heh) So who've I been divided up with?  
MM With Mary. And she's not here. So you've got the whole damn thing to do  
BM But I haven't got the thingymajig in my em=  
BF Are you sh-sure about that?

*(task sheet? list of questions?)*

[general verb 'do' questions omitted]

- 8) CM You're not bothering with going through Bloomfield and all those kind of things? ((0.5))

DM I don't want to write an essay.

*(and other writers? theories?)*

- 9) DM Are you waiting here?  
 MM Sort of. Are you waiting for a lecture or something? Do you want to go for coffee?  
 DM Well no thank you.  
*(or a tutorial? supervisor meeting?)*
- 10) AF Yes but you don't have to find a baby-sitter. And you've got somebody there to go out with straight away. You don't have to sort of phone and make arrangements and things. And find out that =  
 DM = and find someone yeah. =  
 AF = your friend hasn't got a baby-sitter either even if you have.  
*(and pick them up? agree what time to come back?)*

### Part Two open questions

- 11) Do these vague words in English translate word for word into your language, or did you have to re-write the whole sentence to get the same meaning and tone? e.g. can you say 'that + *thing*', do you have an equivalent of *thingymajig*, and is there a variety of ways of ending a sentence vaguely like *and things* and or *something*?
- 12) Are there other ways of expressing vagueness in your language? e.g. French people, asked for an opinion, answer *bof* when they do not have much to say; Cubans, asked how they feel, say *alli* when they feel indifferent but do not want to explain why.
- 13) These vague words in English tend to be indicators of in-group membership; they create an impression of a close relationship; they're used in informal and relaxed social contexts. In your language, what do they indicate; what impression do they create; what's their function; what social contexts are they used in? Answer as fully as possible.

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